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TAGS: [BG](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: USG REJECTS REQUEST FOR SUPPORT FOR POSSIBLE COUP

Classified By: Ambassador Harry K. Thomas, reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (S) Summary: Retired Bangladesh Army Chief Khan asked for USG support in ending Bangladesh,s current administration and in bringing a government of national unity consisting of senior leaders of both major parties. Khan said Bangladesh,s only way out of dynastic government and the rise of Islamic extremism was to draft a new constitution based on the presidential system that would prevent current Prime Minister Zia or former Prime Minister Hasina from holding office. He asked for USG support for a two-three year interim government and a constitutional assembly. Ambassador responded that the USG would not under any circumstances support a coup against the Bangladesh Government (BDG), would ensure that any military action against Prime Minister Zia would result in sanctions against the successor government. End Summary.

¶2. (S) Ambassador recently dined with Lt. General Noorudin. Khan (retired), former Chief of Army Staff and Awami League cabinet minister, who requested USG assistance in bringing a government of national unity to power and ridding Bangladesh of Sheikh Hasina and Khaledia Zia through a series of mass agitations. Ambassador told Khan that the USG supports democracy and stability and cannot sanction any extra constitutional means of removing the government. The USG does not support military coups stressed the Ambassador.

¶3. (S) Khan responded that Bangladesh,s future is hostage to two women who cannot put aside their difference for the nation,s sake. Khan accused the BDG of bankrupting the military. He said the seven top generals &who he derided as the malevolent seven8 were the Prime Minister,s brother (Retired Major Eskander,s) classmates and were chosen for their loyalty and not competence. He said that the BDG had started the politicization of the officer,s corps during Zia,s first term (91-96) and that Hasina had accelerated it (96-2001). He recommended that General Abu Tayeb Mahammad Zaahirul Alam (called General Zahir), commandant of the National Defense College, take charge of the country. He said that General Zahir is a true supporter of democracy and would form a government with competent ministers from both parties for two-three years to improve Bangladesh,s weak institutions, draft a new constitution, end corruption and to attract much needed foreign investment before holding internationally observed democratic elections.

¶4. (S) Khan alleged that the BDG fears coups even from its Eskander,s batch mates and had sidelined Major General Rokon to the Quartermaster Corps earlier this year because he was thought to be a threat to the current government. (Comment: There is much speculation over Rokon,s reassignment and while it could have been because he is one of the few officers thought capable of staging a coup, he is a batch mate of the Prime Minister,s brother and may have been placed in a holding pattern until a more lucrative assignment opens in the coming months. End Comment.)

¶5. (S) Khan, a former minister under Sheikh Hasina resigned from the Awami League in early 2004 in frustration with its inability to focus on the future. He accused &Hasina of losing her cards8 after the August 21 attack on the Awami League. Instead of calling for an independent investigation and taking the moral high ground, she insisted on repeated strikes and attempted to bring the government down. She lost popular support and an unintended consequence may be that the BDG no longer feels compelled to solve the crime, he said.

Khan said that an interim military government is the only alternative to continued dynastic politics. He said that first son Tariq Rahman and his younger brother Arafat Rahman & will terrorize the country, extort money from businesses and ruin the economy.<sup>8</sup> Khan also belittled the political abilities of Hasina,s son and sister, asserting they were equally as corrupt and venal as the Rahman,s.

¶16. (S) Khan, in part, blames himself for the country,s current predicament. He said that when Bangladeshi military dictator General Ershad was forced out of office in 1991, then Pakistani military chief Alam Beg, an old friend and colleague sent him an emissary urging that Khan become the President. When Khan refused, Beg asked whom should Pakistan support. Khan recommended that Pakistan support the BNP because it consisted of military officers and small businessmen he believed would lead the country in the right direction. Pakistan, then used ISI to fund the BNP and India,s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) began funding the Awami League. Such funding continues to this day, Khan said. We have become the playground for India and Pakistan. Khan claimed that New Delhi was unhappy with Sheikh Hasina,s performance and funded both parties during the 2001 elections. He claimed that RAW funded Tariq Rahman, who pledged to deliver his mother on gas exports and water sharing differences but was unable to do so. He predicted New Delhi would work hard to bring Hasina back to power in 2006.

¶17. (S) Khan said that the BDG is catering to the "disastrous policies" of Islamic parties in the ruling coalition to ensure that it wins the 2006 elections. He blamed the BDG,s decision to ban books of the Ahmadiyya sect and not to follow-up on attacks in the northern city of Sylhet on the British High Commissioner and the Mayor on its need to protect the Islamists.

¶18. (S) On September 13, Lt. Gen. Mahbubur Rahman, another retired Army Chief and current BNP MP, told Ambassador that the military would always look to the USG for a signal to go ahead with a coup. He said that the USG had played a positive role in helping to thwart two potential coups in 1996 and a no from the USG would always carry weight. While expressing disdain for Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia, Rahman predicted that Bangladesh would be under dynastic leadership for at least another generation. He said that the Army views itself as Bangladesh,s only respected organization and does not want to interfere in civilian politics. Earlier Major General Chowdhury, retired, told us that the military would do nothing to risk its participation in UN peacekeeping missions.

#### Bio Note Zahir

¶19. (S) General Zahir is a graduate of the British Staff College at Camberley and has traveled extensively, including the U.S. for military conferences. He also served a battalion commander in UNIKOM. Zahir has commanded two brigades and two divisions (most officers only get one command opportunity at each level) and is well respected by colleagues.

¶10. (S) Comment: Khan maintains excellent ties to the military but may be acting on his own. Many interlocutors discount the possibility of a coup but we will keep a close eye on military activities. We will take advantage of DAS Patterson,s October visit to arrange speaking opportunities and meeting with the military to stress the importance of civilian leadership, including an address to the National Defense College and a meeting with General Zahir.

¶11. (S) The United States has tremendous leverage over both the Bangladeshi military and civilian rulers because of Dhaka,s increasing role in UN peacekeeping missions. Bangladesh currently has 12,000 troops participating in UNPKO and we should use the carrot and stick approach to remind Dhaka that: a) a coup would end their participation in PKO and b) that failure to solve terrorist crimes and allowing Islamist groups to operate would call into question

Bangladesh,s ability to join PKOs. End Comment.

THOMAS